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DRIVEN TO DEBT BY DROUGHT

Since 1997, prolonged droughts have emptied villages in Nushki, killed livestock, and trapped families in cycles of debt

By Muhammad Akbar Notezai in Nushki

FOOTPRINTS

RAMAZAN Mengal looks older than his years, though henna dyes his greying beard. A shepherd from Sangeen in Daak, a cluster of villages along the Pakistan-Iran border in Balochistan's Nushki district, Ramazan carries the visible weight of decades of drought.

His burden is not only physical but financial. Years of failed rains have forced him into mounting debt that continues to grow. As grazing land dried up and grass vanished, his livestock weakened and many died. With no pasture left, he began buying fodder at prices far beyond his means.

Like many villagers, Ramazan borrows from a trader in Nushki bazaar who lends to much of Sangeen. Frequent borrowing has blurred the exact amount he owes. "I think I have to pay him Rs300,000 or Rs400,000," he says, seated in his mud-house guest room.

"If we do not take loans, we cannot survive," he adds. "There is nothing else we can do to make ends meet." Each trip to the bazaar deepens his losses. "I sell a goat or sheep for Rs20,000, then buy ration and fodder worth Rs60,000. I pay what I can, and the trader writes the rest in his register. This is how my debt has grown in a couple of years."

The cycle has also weighed on him spiritually. "Despite offering prayers, I have to lie to the trader that I will repay him soon," Ramazan says, touching both ears in a gesture of seeking forgiveness. "Then I return to ask for another loan."

A drought that does not end

Ramazan's story is echoed across Daak. Over black tea, villagers recount similar losses — dead livestock, shrinking herds, and rising debt.

According to Ihsan Mir, a researcher from Nushki, drought in the region is long and relentless. "If there is a drought in Daak, it continues for five or six years," he says.

Nushki lies 140km southwest of Quetta, bordering Afghanistan, where mountains, plains and desert converge. Sangeen sits at the edge of the desert, making it especially vulnerable to rainfall failure. Residents say drought existed even before the 1990s, but rarely lasted more than a year or two. That changed after 1997, when dry spells became longer and more frequent, steadily eroding water sources and livelihoods.

The Pakistan Meteorological Department's Drought Watch 2025 notes that Balochistan has an arid-to-semiarid climate with erratic rainfall and prolonged dry spells. Much of western Balochistan depends on winter rain rather than the summer monsoon. Annual rainfall ranges between 71mm and 231mm, but Nushki receives around 40mm.

Forecasts for December 2025 to February 2026 predict below-normal rainfall and above-normal temperatures, conditions likely to further intensify drought.

Villages left behind

The impact is visible in abandoned settlements. Sangeen's once-populated area now lies deserted.

"We left our houses after the 2022 floods that wreaked havoc in Nushki," says Qudoos Mengal, a teenager who guides visitors through the abandoned village.

The floods affected 33 million people nationwide, killed over 1,700, and caused losses worth $30 billion, according to government estimates. But even after the waters receded, drought continued to drive displacement.

"There used to be over 40 households here," Qudoos says. "Now only 15 remain."

Water scarcity dominates daily life. Villagers travel 15km to fetch water from Zagarwal. Tube wells exist in places like Sangeen, but the water is saline and unfit for drinking.

"There are two tractors and a couple of donkeys in the village," says Haji Manzoor Mengal, in his seventies. "Those who can afford it bring water by tanker. The poor fetch it on donkeys."

During emergencies, tanker water is shared. Cultivation depends entirely on rainfall and is limited to household consumption. "We mostly grow wheat for ourselves," Haji says.

The village cleric adds quietly: "I am a mullah, and I don't even have a donkey to fetch water."

Livelihoods under pressure

Farmers once grew watermelons and muskmelons for sale in Quetta, but prolonged drought has made cultivation unreliable. Many families now sell livestock simply to survive.

Concerns have also grown over the proposed Burj Aziz Dam near Quetta. Tribal elders, led by Sardar Asif Sher Jamaldini, argue that farmers in Nushki and Chaghi depend on seasonal river flows and fear the dam could deprive them of water. In a district already struggling with prolonged drought, residents say the project could worsen their hardships.

Nushki has endured several severe droughts, beginning in 1997, which killed livestock and forced families to migrate. In its aftermath, NGOs began operating in the district. Zahid Mengal, now head of the Azad Foundation in Quetta, has worked in drought-affected areas since the early 2000s.

"Drought recovery requires at least one full year of near-normal rainfall, especially in winter," Zahid explains. "Sustainable improvement depends on repeated seasonal rains, not isolated events."

Balochistan receives about 176 millimetres of rain annually, but districts like Nushki and Chaghi receive less than 50mm. "In such arid zones, even small rainfall deficits devastate crops and livestock," Zahid says. "We've seen this pattern for over 20 years."

Relief without recovery

Relief arrives sporadically. Recently, authorities and the PDMA distributed food supplies in drought- and flood-affected areas, including Nushki. Officials admit the situation is severe.

"The drought situation is worse, not bad, in Nushki," says Additional Deputy Commissioner Umer Jamali. "Recent rain cannot compensate for the long dry season. Daak and Keshangi are among the worst affected."

As the visit to Sangeen ends, Ramazan tends to what remains of his herd, his survival dependent on loans and scarce fodder.

His henna-darkened beard hides the grey, not the toll of decades spent battling a drought that never truly ends. For Ramazan and others in Daak, relief comes in fragments, rain in rumours, and recovery remains a distant promise — while debt continues to grow, written into the land itself.

A MAN stands beside a dried pond in Daak, which has been affected by repeated spells of drought since 1997.—Photo by the writer

Israeli drone attacks kill three Palestinians, two of them teens

• US envoys in Israel to discuss fate of 'New Gaza' plan • Italy urged to join 'ISF' as founding member

DUBLIN (Ireland): A demonstrator holds a placard against the killing of Palestinians despite the ceasefire in Gaza.—Reuters

GAZA CITY: Israeli forces on Saturday killed two Palestinian teenagers in a drone strike near Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahia, while another drone strike killed another Palestinian in Jabalia area, Gaza's civil defence said.

The civil defence agency, which operates as a rescue service under Hamas authority, said the drone strike killed the two teenagers near Kamal Adwan Hospital in Beit Lahia, in northern Gaza.

The territory's Al Shifa Hospital said it received the two bodies, adding they were two boys aged 13 and 15.

The Israeli military claimed the pair had posed an "immediate threat" to its soldiers.

Another fatality was also reported in a separate incident when an Israeli quadcopter struck a group of civilians in Jabalia, in northern Gaza, leaving one Palestinian dead, the civil defence agency said. It did not provide details on the person killed in that incident.

Israeli forces have killed at least 477 Palestinians in Gaza since the ceasefire took effect, according to Gaza's health ministry.

Israeli media restrictions in Gaza and other areas mean casualty figures cannot be verified.

US envoys in Israel

Meanwhile, US envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner were in Israel on Saturday to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, mainly to discuss Gaza, two people briefed on the matter said.

The US on Thursday announced plans for a "New Gaza" rebuilt from scratch, to include residential towers, data centres and seaside resorts. The project forms part of President Donald Trump's push to advance an October ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian group Hamas that has been shaken by repeated violations.

A spokesperson for the Israeli prime minister's office confirmed that the meeting was planned but did not provide details.

US asks Italy to join Gaza force

In a related development, the US has asked Italy to join the International Stabilisation Force for Gaza as a founding member, *Bloomberg News* reported on Saturday, citing people familiar with the matter. —Agencies

Ukraine, Russia, US agree to more talks next week in UAE

Kyiv accuses Moscow of threatening talks with fresh strikes

ABU DHABI: Ukraine and Russia ended two days of US-brokered direct talks on Saturday and agreed to hold more next week in Abu Dhabi, even as Kyiv accused Moscow of undermining the negotiations towards ending the war by launching fresh strikes.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said of the talks that "a lot was discussed, and it is important that the conversations were constructive".

He added that next round could take place "as early as next week".

On the eve of the second day of talks, Russia launched a barrage of drones and missiles on Ukraine, cutting off millions from electricity in sub-zero temperatures. Kyiv accused Moscow of undermining the negotiations by launching yet another "night of Russian terror".

The Moscow-installed governor in the occupied Kherson region, Vladimir Saldo, said a Ukrainian drone strike killed three people in an ambulance van heading to a sick man.

A UAE government spokesperson said the talks, which involved top military officers from both sides, had been held in a "constructive and positive atmosphere".

According to the Emirati spokesperson, the talks were held on "outstanding elements of the US-proposed peace framework as well as confidence-building measures".

According to Zelensky, "the central focus of the discussions was the possible parameters for ending the war".

Both warring sides say the fate of territory in the eastern Donbas region is the main unresolved issue in the search for a settlement.

While diplomacy to end Europe's worst conflict since World War II has gained pace again, Moscow and Kyiv appear deadlocked over the issue of territory.

Donbas territory dispute

President Trump met Zelensky at the World Economic Forum in Davos and US envoy Steve Witkoff later held talks with Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin.

Hours after Putin met Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner in Moscow, the Kremlin said its demand that Kyiv withdraw from the eastern Donbas region still stood, calling it "a very important condition".

Kyiv rejects it. "The Donbas is a key issue," Zelensky told reporters ahead of the talks in the UAE.

Zelensky said he and Trump had agreed on post-war security guarantees in Davos.

Russian and Ukrainian negotiators are last known to have met face-to-face in Istanbul last summer, in talks that ended only in deals to exchange captured soldiers.

The Abu Dhabi meeting was the first time they have faced each other to talk about the Trump administration's plan.

An initial US draft drew heavy criticism in Kyiv and western Europe for hewing too closely to Moscow's demands, while Russia rejected later versions for proposing European peacekeepers in Ukraine.

Putin has repeatedly said Moscow intends to get full control of eastern Ukraine by force if talks fail.

Trump has in the past pressured Ukraine to agree to terms that Kyiv sees as capitulation. —Agencies

China probes disciplinary charges against top military official

BEIJING: China said on Saturday the senior vice chairman of its powerful Central Military Commission (CMC) and another high-ranking official were under investigation for suspected "serious violations of discipline", a common euphemism for corruption.

The announcement marks the latest push in a sweeping drive to root out graft at all levels of the party and state since President Xi Jinping came to power more than a decade ago.

"Following a review... it has been decided to initiate an investigation into Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli," the defence ministry said in a statement.

The two men were "suspected of serious violations of discipline and the law", the ministry said.

Zhang Youxia is China's highest-ranked general as the more senior CMC vice chairman. He is also a member of the 24-member executive body of the Chinese Communist Party.—AFP

US military action would trigger 'all-out war', Iranian official warns

TEHRAN: A senior Iranian official warned on Friday that the country would treat any attack as an "all-out war", threatening the "hardest way possible" response ahead of the arrival of a US military aircraft carrier strike group and other assets in the Middle East.

Tensions have spiked in the region, leading European airlines to alter or cancel routes, as US President Donald Trump said an "armada" was heading toward the Persian Gulf.

"This military buildup — we hope it is not intended for real confrontation — but our military is ready for the worst-case scenario. This is why everything is on high alert in Iran," said the senior Iranian official, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the situation.

"This time we will treat any attack — limited, unlimited, surgical, kinetic, whatever they call it — as an all-out war against us, and we will respond in the hardest way possible to settle this," the official said.

The Iranian official warned against any violation of borders.

"If the Americans violate Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity, we will respond," the official said, declining to specify what that response might look like.

"A country under constant military threat from the United States has no option but to ensure that everything at its disposal can be used to push back and, if possible, restore balance against anyone who dares to attack Iran," the official added.

Regional neighbours expressed concern on Friday regarding potential escalation. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said in a televised interview that there were signs Israel was still seeking an opportunity to attack Iran, warning such a move could further destabilise the region.

"I hope they find a different path, but the reality is that Israel, in particular, is looking for an opportunity to strike Iran," Fidan said.

Airline avoids Middle East

The rising geopolitical friction has immediately impacted commercial aviation.

The Dutch arm of airline group Air France-KLM announced on Saturday that KLM would avoid flying over large parts of the Middle East until further notice.

"As a precaution, given the geopolitical situation, KLM will not fly through the airspace of Iran, Iraq and Israel and will not fly over several countries in the Gulf region," a KLM spokesperson said.

The decision means KLM will not fly to Dubai, Riyadh, Dammam and Tel Aviv. The airline did not specify a single event that provoked the decision, though fears of conflict have grown following Trump's deployment order.

Air France, which belongs to the same group as KLM, resumed its Dubai service on Saturday after temporarily suspending it the day before.

The French airline said it was "monitoring developments" in the region "to ensure the highest level of flight safety and security".—Agencies

Eight dead, more than 80 missing in Indonesia landslide

Triggered by heavy rainfall, it struck villages in Java's West Bandung region

CISARUA: A predawn landslide killed at least eight people and left more than 80 missing on Indonesia's main island of Java on Saturday, a disaster official said.

Triggered by heavy rainfall, it struck villages in Java's West Bandung region in the early hours — at around 2.30am (1930 GMT Friday) — and buried residential areas.

Floods and landslides are common across the vast archipelago during the rainy season, which typically runs from October to March.

"There was a rumbling noise, like thunder," Oyoh, a resident of Pasirlangu village who, like many Indonesians, only has one name, told *AFP*.

"It had been raining nonstop since the morning, and then it [the landslide] happened. I immediately felt scared."

The 52-year-old had been evacuated to the village's government office along with dozens of others, mainly women and children.

She said her house survived the landslide, but her niece, her niece's husband and their two children were missing.

Abdul Muhari, a spokesman for the national disaster agency, confirmed that eight people were killed and 82 were unaccounted for.

West Bandung's mayor Jeje Ritchie Ismail told reporters that the military, police and volunteers were assisting in the search.

However, he warned that the terrain was extremely difficult and the ground remained unstable.

The local search and rescue agency said it was conducting manual excavation, spraying the soil with water pumps and using drones to search for the victims.

Forest loss

The disaster comes after tropical storms and intense monsoon rains late last year triggered flooding and landslides that killed around 1,200 people and displaced more than 240,000 in Indonesia's Sumatra island, according to official figures.

Environmentalists, experts and the government have pointed to the role forest loss played in the flooding and landslides that washed torrents of mud into villages.

Forests help absorb rainfall and stabilise the ground held by their roots, and their absence makes areas more prone to flash flooding and landslides, David Gaveau, founder of conservation start-up The TreeMap, told *AFP* in December.

Indonesia lost more than 240,000 hectares of primary forest in 2024, according to analysis by The TreeMap's Nusantara Atlas project.

LOCAL search and rescue workers conduct manual excavation and use drones to search for the victims after a landslide.—Reuters

It is regularly among the countries with the largest annual forest loss as mining, plantations and fires have caused the clearance of large tracts of lush vegetation in recent decades, NGOs have said.

The government filed multiple lawsuits following the Sumatra floods, seeking more than $200 million in damages against six firms.

It also stripped more than two dozen permits this week from forestry, mining and hydroelectric companies in Sumatra.

This month, torrential rains battered Indonesia's Siau island, causing a flash flood that killed at least 16 people.—AFP

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